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Domestic violence aid offered

Program pays for needed legal help in abusive situations

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Domestic violence victims needing legal help can get it through a program launched by Central Southwest Mississippi Legal Services Corp.

The Domestic Violence Legal Assistance Program fills the gap of legal resources for domestic violence survivors who can't afford an attorney.

Domestic violence survivors in Jackson, Vicksburg, Hattiesburg, Oxford and Pascagoula can all get help. Julia Crockett, deputy director of Central Southwest Mississippi Legal Services Corp., said the program expects to help nearly 1,000 domestic violence victims.

Crockett said legal help gives domestic abuse survivors a way to rebuild their lives.

"They have been made to feel by the abuser that no one is going to help them do anything, so when they come to us they are desperate," she said. "Those who need legal help and don't get it feel totally lost. Because then they feel like they are forced to stay in that situation."

Crockett said the program, funded by a \$300,000 grant from the U.S. Justice Department, has no economic restrictions on who can get help. Legal services typically helps the poor.

Gladys Bunzy, who said she was in an abusive relationship with a boyfriend for eight years, said such a program is long overdue and could be a lifeline for those escaping violent relationships.

"When I finally made up my mind to leave, I had a restraining order put against him and that was \$50 but that was \$50 well spent to me," said Bunzy, 40. "For people who can't afford it, this will be a godsend ... If a woman knows she is going to get some help that will be a burden off her mind, if the law will help her keep that person away from her."

Gwen Bouie-Haynes, project director of the Domestic Violence Services Center for Catholic Charities Inc., said often domestic violence survivors do not have the money to seek legal representation.

"Legal assistance is a major issue for women fleeing a domestic violence situation," she said. "Often times women are in need of immediate legal assistance services for the protection of the mother and the child. To get a protective order you need to be represented by an attorney."

Crockett said the pilot program was launched in 1998 at the Haven House Family Shelter Inc., a domestic violence shelter for women and children in Vicksburg. The program has helped victims in 90 court cases, and 150 legal counseling sessions have been held there.

Lark Johnson, executive director at the shelter, said some of the women would never have received legal help had it not been for the program.

"In the past, they would have had to report their spouse's income and that would be included in determining whether they were eligible to get legal help, whether they had access to that money or not," she said. "They can get help now with no barriers for custody cases, protective orders and other things."

Johnson said through the program her shelter, which served 187 women and children last year, has been able to form better relationships with those who work with domestic violence victims.

"Judges and law enforcement officers are trained to help them understand what their options are to stabilize a violent home," Johnson said. "They are also trained to detect evidence of domestic violence in a home. So they won't have to solely rely on the testimony of the victim."

Educating court and law enforcement officers is a program priority, Crockett said, because in that emotional and painful situation "sensitivity and education is absent" among some who deal with victims.

For details about the Domestic Violence Legal Assistance Program, call 601-948-6752.